Frank Norris

Gold Rush-Era Mining Sites in Alaska's National Parks

A century ago, perhaps a hundred thousand "stampeders" headed north in search of Klondike gold. An estimated 30,000 to 40,000 made it all the way to Dawson City, Yukon Territory. There they found their golden dreams shattered by the hard truth that all the gold-bearing creeks had already been staked. The disillusioned throngs were then forced to make difficult choices. Many idled about Dawson for a few weeks, then took the long trip home. But others—the hopeful or the merely desperate—stuck it out. Those that remained formed the core of those that prospected the North Country's mountains and valleys for decades thereafter.

News of gold discoveries soon drew many of Dawson's miners and prospectors west into Alaska. In the spring of 1899, word filtered into town that a fabulous gold strike had been made in northwestern Alaska. Gold had been discovered the previous September along Anvil Creek near the northern shore of Norton Sound. The Nome gold rush of 1899-1900 attracted more than 20,000 prospectors, capitalists, and camp followers. Nome, and much of the surrounding Seward Peninsula, remained an active mining area for years afterward.

A few years later, another big mining rush took place in Alaska's interior. Felix Pedro, an Italian immigrant, discovered gold near the Chena River in August 1902. From 1903 to 1905, thousands flocked to the Fairbanks gold camp.

Based on these and other discoveries, prospectors fanned out all over Alaska and many small but important gold rushes took place. Some of these occurred within or near Alaska's national park units. For instance, within the Yukon-Charley National Preserve, several Yukon River tributaries were mined by primitive means around the turn of the century and by dredging operations in later years. Gold was discovered in what later became Denali National Park and Preserve in 1903. By the end of the decade, scores had flocked to the Kantishna area and miners worked the area's creeks for years afterward. On the north side of the Wrangell Mountains, within today's Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, courageous miners braved frigid, long winters to glean meager returns from area streams. Kobuk Valley National Park, as well as Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, also witnessed gold rush-era activity although on a small, more ephemeral scale.

By the 1970s, the old mining areas, with the notable exception of the Kantisha area, were largely abandoned. There were relatively few active mining claims and even fewer holders of patented mining property. That decade, from December 1971 until December 1980, was spent debating the Alaska lands question. That debate concluded with the enactment of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. This act created or expanded most of Alaska's national park units.

In the public's imagination, Alaska has long been equated with outstanding scenic wonders and wildlife values. Most of the units created by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act contain spectacular wilderness. Eight of Alaska's park areas boast large designated wilderness areas. The total area in wilderness exceeds 32 million acres, an expanse greater than the State of Mississippi. The preponderance of wilderness has led

The lonely, long-abandoned Yale Cabin dates from the early years of the century. It is now located in Gates of the Artic National Park and Preserve. Photo by Jet Lowe, NPS.

many of Alaska's park visitors—and in many instances National Park Service decision-makers as well—to believe that cultural resources in Alaska's parks are relatively unimportant.

In order to educate the public and park staff about this rich cultural heritage, cultural resource professionals in recent years have compiled an impressive list of archeological overviews, historic resource studies, and similar documents that have pinpointed the importance and scope of archeological and historical values that exist within Alaska's parks. While important, these publications have been distributed to a relatively small and specialized audience of park managers and cultural resource professionals.

In order to broaden public knowledge about the gold rush-era in Alaska's parks, the region's Cultural Resources Advisory Committee decided in early 1997 to publish a pamphlet series that spotlights the century-old mining activities in six of Alaska's national park units. The text and graphics for the "gold rush centennial brochures" were produced by the various park cultural resource specialists. The brochures were distributed to the parks to be used at their discretion.

The brochures, which are available to Alaska's park visitors, should play a key role in educating the public about the history of gold mining in Alaska's national parks. These new publications should also help visitors understand that Alaska's parks offer exciting history as well as outstanding scenic and wildlife values.

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Geoarcheology of the Jinny Hill Mines

Traditional geological methods such as petrography, field mapping, sediment coring, and particle-size analysis, were used to investigate the Jinny Hill mines, a 19th-century industrial archeological site at Cheshire, Connecticut. The Jinny Hill mines were the first barite mines in the United States, and the deepest (600 feet) and most extensive vein mines (four miles of passages) in Connecticut. Despite the impressive scale of the historic mining operations, many landowners were unaware of its former existence. These superlatives also contrast oddly with the near invisibility of the mines today, providing a case study in the ephemerality of this industrial landscape.

Barite, also known historically as barytes, heavy spar, tiff, and cawk, is barium sulfate. Derived from the Greek word for heavy, barite is one of the heaviest nonmetallic minerals with a specific gravity of 4.5. It is most often white in color, soft (3 on the Mohs scale), has three cleavages, and is relatively inert. Barite was discovered in Cheshire about 1813 and was mined there from 1838 to 1878. The Cheshire barite district was comprised of the Jinny Hill mines and the smaller, short-lived Peck Mountain mines. The total production of 160,000 tons came mainly from Jinny Hill. From Cheshire, barite was transported to New Haven via the now-defunct Farmington Canal where it was milled, affording the sole American supply (during the early years of the operation) for use in the manufacture of white paint.

The climax of mining activity came shortly after the Civil War, when several companies mined the deposits simultaneously. The majority of the miners were Cornish immigrants who had come to this country specifically to work underground. Eventually it became uneconomical to mine the deposits.

No field investigations of the historic Jinny Hill mines occurred before Crawford E. Fritts, employed by the United States Geological Survey in the late 1950s, mapped the bedrock geology of the Mount Carmel quadrangle. Fritts identified three parallel veins of barite, historically known as